During the Britpop era of the 1990s, the name of Mike Leigh was invoked regularly both by musicians and the journalists who wrote about them. To compare a band or a record to Mike Leigh was to use a form of cultural shorthand that established a shared aesthetic between musician and filmmaker. Often this aesthetic similarity went undiscussed beyond a vague acknowledgement that both parties were interested in 'real life' rather than the escapist fantasies usually associated with popular entertainment. This focus on 'real life' involved exposing the ugly truth of British existence concealed behind drawing room curtains and beneath prim good manners, its 'secrets and lies' as Leigh would later title one of his films.

I know this because I was there. Here's how I remember it all:

**Jarvis Cocker and *Abigail's Party***

To achieve this exposure, both Leigh and the Britpop bands he influenced used a form of 'real world' observation that some critics found intrusive to the extent of voyeurism, particularly when their gaze was directed, as it so often was, at the working class. Jarvis Cocker, lead singer and lyricist of the band Pulp -exemplars, along with Suede and Blur, of Leigh-esque Britpop - described the band's biggest hit, and one of the
definitive Britpop songs, 'Common People', as dealing with "a certain voyeurism on the part of the middle classes, a certain romanticism of working class culture and a desire to slum it a bit". As has been well documented, 'Common People' was inspired by an encounter Cocker had with a wealthy Greek art student who expressed a fascination for what she perceived as the 'authenticity' of working class life but which he considered to be 'slumming'; however Cocker also found inspiration in 'a recent proliferation of Mike Leigh video box sets' which suggested that 'the song's sentiments might have a wider resonance'.

Cocker is a self-confessed voyeur: 'I like to watch', he intones over footage of his native Sheffield in the opening sequence of John Dower's 2003 documentary *Live Forever: The Rise and Fall of Britpop*, and one of Pulp's best songs is entitled 'I Spy'. This song recalls *Abigail's Party* (1977) probably Leigh's best-known work (particularly in the UK where it is considered to be a modern classic). In the film a suburban couple, Lawrence and Bev, invite their neighbours over for drinks on the same night their teenage daughter, the eponymous Abigail, is having her birthday party in another house nearby. Lawrence is a successful, but over-stressed, estate agent who has pretensions towards being cultured, as evidenced by his leather bound collection of the complete works of Shakespeare, which he proudly displays to the guests but also admits he hasn't read and his professed passion for classical music and fine art. Lawrence's tastes clash with those of his wife, a former beautician who prefers popular music and art, particularly if it has an erotic dimension. Bev is a much more sensual being than Lawrence, whose attention is focused on his job which, as he reminds her, is not '9 to 5', and it is easy to imagine her as the woman with whom Cocker's narrator has an affair in 'I Spy' and Lawrence as the
husband to whom the song is addressed. The narrator tells the husband to take him very seriously. He brags about drinking his booze, smoking his cigarettes, and having sex with "Bev" for four months on the bed she and her husband picked out together. Indeed, the last line seems a conscious echo of Leigh's film, in which Bev complains to their guests that she was not involved in selecting their car even though when they bought the house she and Lawrence chose the furniture together.

[INSERT IMAGE: <Abigails-Party-03.tif>]


'I Spy' is not just about voyeurism or adultery, it also deals with a form of class warfare: Cocker sings that he wishes the husband would come home unexpectedly and catch them one afternoon in the living room; revenge, he tells us, is his specialty as he takes what the husband loves most. This cuckolding is a skirmish in an endless class struggle, the conflict between the haves and have nots.

Cocker has been protected from charges of the kind of cultural tourism he raises against the Greek student in 'Common People' partly by his 'outsider' status, as proudly proclaimed in the song 'Missshapes', but also by his Northern working class background. The narrator of 'I Spy' may claim to have been 'dragged up' but in *Live Forever* Cocker's mother points out that the singer enjoyed a 'privileged' childhood in a bohemian household, an upbringing, she says, he likes to pretend didn't actually take place. And indeed, the fame that the success of 'Common People' and the subsequent Pulp album *Different Class* (1995) brought Cocker severely impaired his ability to write: made highly visible by his new celebrity, Cocker was no longer able to lurk in the margins, observing
and taking notes on the sordid behaviour of others. As a result, on Pulp's next album, This Is Hardcore (1998), Cocker turned his gaze inward to focus on that most audience-alienating of pop music topics, the unpleasantness of fame. With This Is Hardcore Cocker made his new fans into voyeurs of his own mental and spiritual collapse; unsurprisingly, it sold a fraction of the amount of A Different Class and effectively ended Pulp's career as bona fide, charting pop stars.

Nevertheless, history has shown that Cocker was correct in his diagnosis of the revival of interest in Leigh's work in the early '90s: Britpop was very much about looking at Britain, its people and their pursuits - and, just as importantly, being looked at. Certainly, I remember Britpop as a visual phenomenon as much as a musical movement: Britain changed visibly, most obviously in the clothes young people started to wear. And this 'new' style involved looking back, most obviously to the 'Swinging '60s' which functioned as Britpop's main stylistic source. However, the '60s were not the only source. Even before the Britpop explosion, Pulp, along with Suede and, to a lesser extent St. Etienne and Denim, had been grouped together by the British music press as part of a Seventies revival, apparent as much in the clothes they wore - satin, corduroy, nylon and other man-made fabrics typical of that decade's fashions (Pulp even had a song titled 'Acrylic Afternoons') - as in the music they made. And in the video for 'Girls and Boys' Blur drew on the styles of 1980s football 'casuals' (particularly singer Damon Albarn in his Sergio Tacchini tracksuit top). Musicians, and their fans, looked back not only to the clothes worn by earlier bands and singers, but also to the films and television programmes of the previous three decades. And this, I will now argue, was another key
role Leigh's oeuvre served for Britpop: as a reservoir of signs and images, iconography and style.

**Graham Coxon and *Meantime***

Colin in Leigh's TV film *Meantime* (1983, played by Tim Roth), with his heavy rimmed glasses, short, tufty hair and drab, scruffy clothes may seem an unlikely source on which to base one's dress sense but his resemblance to one of the major style icons of Britpop, Blur guitarist Graham Coxon, is striking. And the resemblance is not only sartorial: Colin's shy, introverted, socially awkward personality, which contrasts sharply with that of his caustic tongued and verbally aggressive brother, Mark (as played by Phil Daniels who would himself become a Britpop icon for his contribution to the Blur hit 'Parklife' and performance in its promotional video²), recalls Coxon's own, in music critic Garry Mulholland's phrase, 'childlike public image' (which may or may not be a contrived persona: as Mulholand as remarked, 'I've interviewed [Coxon] and frankly have no idea whether he's putting us on'³) and his relationship with Damon Albarn, Blur's much more gregarious and outspoken (particularly in the band's Britpop heyday) singer.

However, Coxon's resemblance to/imitation of Colin is less surprising if we place the guitarist's appearance, and demeanour, in the context of the British 'Indie' music scene from which Blur emerged (even though their nominally independent record label, Food, operated in partnership with EMI, eventually being fully acquired by the major label in 1994, the year Blur released their breakthrough album, the Britpop classic *Parklife*). As Simon Reynolds has convincingly argued, Indie music in the '80s fetishised childhood imagery and clothing as a response to, and a form of protest against, the contemporary
'body culture' of mainstream pop music with its emphasis on 'a hypersexuality foreign to most Indie fans' experience'. Reynolds writes:

An idea of innocence pervades and possesses the scene. A huge proportion of Indie groups have pictures of children or childish things on their record sleeves. You can see this innocence in the way fanzines privilege naïveté and enthusiasm and mess (and use graphics from old annuals and children's books). A multitude of desires crystallise in the fantasy of being like a child again.

In Coxon's case, this is most evident in the video for Blur's number one single, 'Country House' which features the glamour model Jo Guest, famous in the UK in the '90s for her regular topless appearances in tabloid newspapers, and three other scantily clad young women being chased by a lecherous older man in a pastiche of the notoriously sexist comedian Benny Hill: in the face of all this bawdiness, Coxon appears sullen and removed, moodily strumming his guitar which he holds almost like a shield, as if sulking over, and attempting to limit, his participation in events.

Reynolds goes on to state that 'style is where the Sixties and childhood converge', which perfectly describes Coxon's dress sense: a regular during the '90s at '60s themed London club night 'Blowup' (named after the 1966 Antonioni film, set in the 'Swinging' London that was the touchstone for '90s 'Cool Britannia'), Coxon's wardrobe was the most obviously, and authentically, Mod influenced of the four members of Blur. However, his style also betrays the fetishism of childhood identified by Reynolds, as exemplified by his regular wearing, at the time, of a 'snake belt', a hole-less, elasticated
strap with a snake-shaped clasp rather than a buckle, produced in brightly coloured stripes and intended as a kind of 'training' garment for children.

As Reynolds observed, '[m]any ['80s] Indie fans adopt the kemptness and austerity of an 'ordinary person' of the Fifties or Sixties', which was certainly true of Coxon with his fondness for tweed jackets and fair-isle patterned pullovers, although he also had a tendency towards scruffiness, which would have been unacceptable to either an 'ordinary person' of that era or to a Mod, but which is perfectly consistent with Indie's fetishism of childhood, children not being renowned for their sartorial neatness. Reynolds points out that the Indie aesthetic combines 'overtly childish things' with the 'ordinary person' look, listing 'dufflecoats, birthday-boy shirts with the top button done up, outsize pullovers' as essential items for a male fan's wardrobe, and 'bows and ribbons and ponytails, plimsolls and dainty white ankle socks, floral or polka-dot frocks' for Indie females. Having attended Blowup myself, and as a former regular at its Glasgow equivalent, Divine, I can confirm that this look was still very much in evidence in the early '90s, with the Riot Grrrl band, and Blowup habitu?, Huggy Bear, which included female and male members, sporting virtually all the items Reynolds lists with a clearly Mod-influenced style (Coxon dated their guitarist Jo Johnson; their relationship, which coincided with the release of 'Country House', may also partly explain Coxon's demeanour in the video, Huggy Bear being militant feminists).

The Indie look Reynolds describes changed in the late '80s and early '90s with the rise of 'baggy' bands like the Stone Roses, Happy Mondays and, slightly later, the first incarnation of Blur. These bands fused '60s derived melodies with beats inspired by funk, hip hop and house music. A '60s influence was also evident in their look, particularly the
hairstyles of the Stone Roses (singer Ian Brown and guitarist John Squire had once been Mods) and Blur (particularly Coxon and Albarn), but Baggy's wardrobe of oversized t-shirts, loose, often flared, jeans and Kangol hats owed more to American rappers and British soccer 'casuals'.

Baggy prepared the ground for Indie's encounter with dance music, as exemplified by Primal Scream, previously paragons of Indie's '60s fetishism, and their acid house inspired album *Screamadelica* (1991). This record endorsed club culture for many Indie fans who started attending 'raves', taking Ecstasy, and, inspired by the band's lead singer Bobby Gillespie's own sartorial transformation from a black leather clad rocker into a luminous, E-addled 'starchild', started wearing clothes inspired by clubwear; white denim became particularly fashionable as did brightly coloured t-shirts; many female Indie fans began to dress more glamorously, albeit by still drawing on influences from the '60s and '70s in their adoption of fake fur coats and hats, short gold and silver lamé skirts and dresses, hot-pants, go-go boots and artificial eyelashes. In terms of both visuality and mood, Indie's 'dance' phase made the scene suddenly much brighter.

When this phase gave way to grunge, ushered in by the massive and unexpected success of Nirvana's album *Nevermind* (1991), with its sartorial repertoire of checked flannel shirts, faded blue jeans and trucker caps, Blur were largely dismissed by the Indie cognoscenti as baggy also-rans or, worse, opportunists lacking in 'authenticity' - a quality of metaphysical importance to Indie fans; as Mulholland has observed 'the early Blur were only one step away from a manufactured band' who had jumped on the dance band-wagon with their singles 'She's So High' and 'There's No Other Way' and their,
rather slight, d'ut album Leisure. (1991). Although it sold less than its predecessor the band earned critical respect with their 'British' themed second album *Modern Life Is Rubbish* (1993, presaged by a London-referencing single, 'For Tomorrow'), their Mod/Skinhead-influenced new image, and their tour of small provincial British towns. As Blur grew in credibility, the Coxon/Colin look began to manifest at Indie clubs, with snake belts, 'National Health' glasses and parkas - of the kind worn by British schoolchildren in the '70s and '80s and by Colin in *Meantime*, rather than the cooler Mod type sported by Phil Daniels in *Quadrophenia* and occasionally by Coxon himself - becoming desirable fashion items. As, indeed, did Mike Leigh films. I vividly remember attending Divine one evening, shortly before the Britpop explosion that followed the success of Blur's 'Girls and Boys' and Oasis's 'Supersonic' and both bands' appearances on the influential 'youth TV' programme, *The Word*, having watched *Meantime* for what must have been the sixth or seventh time with my then girlfriend and several of our friends, and being momentarily thrown when I encountered a dead ringer for Colin, whom I almost knocked over on my way into the toilets. Not only did this fail creature look exactly like Roth's character, he *acted* like him too, cowering back then skulking away with a hunted look behind his thick rimmed spectacles, mumbling apologetically as he went. As the club filled that night, I noticed at least another two similarly attired attendees. Of course, they may have been attempting an imitation of Coxon, but nevertheless it felt very much like Colin had taken on a new relevancy, had even become *cool*. And I remember too that the insults directed against Colin by Daniels' character Mark - 'dobbin' and, particularly, 'muppet' - and Colin's deadpan response, 'Don't call me that', became catchphrases not only amongst my immediate group of friends, but by new
acquaintances we made through attending Divine. It seemed that Meantime had become a (sub)cultural touchstone for this new phase of the Indie scene in the same way that '60s films like A Taste of Honey or Saturday Night And Sunday Morning had in the '80s.

**Suede and Naked**

This may seem odd, as Meantime's drab palette of greys and browns, and its themes of long-term unemployment and, as a consequence, stultifying boredom is at odds with the 'day-glo' brightness of Britpop as exemplified by the videos for 'Parklife' or 'Common People'. Indeed, Meantime appears to have more in common, thematically, with Nevermind, Kurt Cobain's home-town of Aberdeen, Washington having experienced high levels of joblessness in the '80s. However, Leigh's film also speaks to the resurgence in an avowedly British aesthetic that emerged just before, and gave birth to, the Britpop explosion, from bands like Blur, Pulp (who, it is important to remember, had been active since 1978), the Auteurs and, particularly, Suede. The latter's song 'Animal Nitrate', released in 1993, a year before Blur's 'Girls and Boys', with its lyrical reference to a 'council home' and its video filmed on a London high rise housing estate similar to the setting for Meantime, seems particularly Leigh-esque and the band's singer, Brett Anderson, would later remark that, at the beginning, Britpop had 'the charm and intelligence of a Mike Leigh film' but by 1996 'it had become a Carry On movie'. Like Cocker, Anderson came across as something of a voyeur, obsessed with the seedy and the seamy aspects of British life: sexual repression and perversion, suicidally bored housewives, hooliganism and vandalism.
Sartorially, Suede's image referenced the 1970s, particularly glam rock which was also a major influence on their sound, particularly the music of David Bowie, although they replaced glam's gaudiness with a darker palette of blacks, browns and greys similar to that of *Meantime* (Anderson even wore a large parka similar to Colin's) or to Leigh's *Naked*, also released in 1993. The apocalyptic concerns of Naked are recalled in, and perhaps were an influence upon, Suede's second album *Dog Man Star* (1994), which was a much bleaker affair, and less commercially successful, than their eponymous debut (1993), just as the harsh, often violent *Naked* was itself a radical stylistic departure by Leigh. Their third album, *Coming Up* (1996), consisting largely of upbeat pop songs such as the hit single 'Trash', was more compatible with the 'feel good' sensibilities of Britpop and became their most commercially successful release in a period where record sales for 'Indie' music were higher than ever before or since; however the band did not significantly change their image and avoided any use of the patriotic and/or '60s themed iconography that had become practically *de rigueur* for British guitar bands (which is understandable given that Anderson had been the cover star for the issue of music magazine *Select* which championed the pre-Britpop wave of British music mentioned above, superimposing a picture of Anderson over a large Union Jack and the headline, 'Yanks Go Home', making him look like, in the words of The Auteurs' singer Luke Haines, 'a ninny'\textsuperscript{10} (Gillen and McKelvie, 2007, NP).

**Blur and Naked**

*Naked* itself seems incompatible with the almost cartoonish brightness of Britpop, but its darkness, visually and thematically, gives it much in common with the drum 'n'
bass and trip-hop music which emerged in parallel with the rise of Blur, Oasis et al. This was a different type of British music, influenced by Jamaican dub and reggae and American house, techno and hip-hop, reflecting the country's ethnic mix, particularly in urban areas, much more accurately than Britpop the practitioners of which were virtually all white. Aesthetically, *Naked* sits comfortably next to albums such as Massive Attack's *Protection* (1994), which addresses Britain's homelessness problem, also tackled in the film, Goldie's *Timeless* (1995) which, like *Naked*, is influenced by the tensions and pressures of inner city life, and Tricky's *Maxinquaye* (1995) and *Pre-Millenium Tension* (1995) which share the film's apocalyptic themes and imagery. Indeed, it's easy to imagine an alternative version of *Naked*, sound-tracked by these artists.

However, Blur's follow up to *Parklife*, 1995's *The Great Escape*, shares some of *Naked*'s darkness: even the jaunty 'Country House', which topped the charts and allowed Blur to defeat Oasis in the so-called 'Battle of Britpop' that occurred when both bands released singles on the same day, contains references to depression in its mention of Prozac and the refrain 'Blow, blow me low/I am so sad I don't know why', while the ballad 'The Universal' presents a dystopian future in which the whole of society is pacified by the titular anti-depressant drug and subject to constant surveillance ('No-one here is alone/Satellites in every home). The theme of surveillance is also present in *Naked* in Johnny's encounter with Brian, the security guard who mans a bank of monitors in the 'postmodernist gas chamber' of an office building which sits, empty and unused, in a city full of people desperate for shelter.

'The Universal's' video references another film director, Stanley Kubrick, and his adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971): the band perform in a space similar to the
film's Korova Milk Bar, dressed in all-white outfits which recall the overalls worn by its thuggish Droogs; outside, on a high rise estate, 'ordinary' people, many of them elderly, dressed in drab greys and browns, are subjected to manipulation by a mind control device. In the video, Coxon again seems disengaged, playing his guitar sitting on the floor as he did in the 'Country House' promo, but this time his demeanour seems appropriate for the themes of both the video and the song. Despite these dark elements, 'The Universal's lush orchestral arrangement and comforting melodic warmth (it was a Christmas single and sound-tracked a television advertisement for British Gas) ensured the song became another top ten hit.

_The Great Escape's_ other singles, 'Charmless Man' and 'Stereotypes', which feature perhaps Albarn's most caustic lyrics ever, also made the top ten. 'Stereotypes' is particularly scathing, its depiction of middle class suburbanites involved in sexual 'swinging' ('Wife swapping is the future/You know that it'll suit you) resembling a dark remake of _Abigail's Party_, filtered through Johnny from Naked's misanthropic worldview, while the single's cover image of two monkeys in a tree is indicative of Albarn's attitude towards his subject matter: unlike Cocker in 'I Spy', Albarn's narrator does not justify his scorn on a class basis, with the result that he comes across as simply contemptuous.

The song's video was unremarkable, merely featuring some (rather pedestrian) live footage of the band edited to fit the studio version of the song. The 'Charmless Man' promo, on the other hand, has a narrative, the opening sequence of which focusing on a desperate looking man running down a dark, rain soaked street at night recalls the beginning of _Naked_. In the video, the band have abandoned the brightness and sharpness of the _Parklife_ era, opting instead for a darker, scruffier wardrobe which points both back
to their early ’90s 'baggy' roots and forwards to the American 'alt rock' look, and sound, they would adopt for their next album (*Blur*, 1997). Without any of his Mod 'cool' on display and dressed in a bright blue, padded vinyl, hooded jacket resembling an anorak - which Reynolds describes as the '[o]ne garment above all [which] has come to represent the ['80s Indie] scene'\textsuperscript{11} - baggy, washed out jeans and a drab, grey shirt, Coxon is particularly Colin-esque in this video.

While he does not appear sullen, as in the 'Country House' promo, Coxon nevertheless seems somewhat removed from the proceedings, avoiding the camera and offering up a rather aloof, pedestrian performance (his demeanour also makes him look like he needs to blow his nose, heightening the resemblance to the perpetually congested Colin). In his essay on Indie style, Reynolds quotes fellow music journalist David Stubbs' phrase 'ostentatious absenteeism', used to describe Morrissey, another British Indie icon who regularly deployed images of ill health or physical disability including wearing a hearing aid and, like Coxon, large rimmed 'National Health' spectacles. Reynolds compares Morrissey's 'incendiary forays into the domain of pop TV' to the behaviour of 'those gauche adolescents who insist on attending parties, only to parade a chaste disdain'\textsuperscript{12} for the event. This last phrase, 'chaste disdain', perfectly describes Coxon's demeanour in both the 'Country House' and 'Charmless Man' videos, and his attitude generally towards Britpop (which John Harris described, in the title of his book on the subject, as the 'Last Party'\textsuperscript{13}): among, but not *of*, it.

**Damon Albarn and *Life Is Sweet***
Morrissey, Reynolds claims, 'represents those who fail to live as the young are now expected, fail to have sex/fun/style'. Those who succeed in these expectations are the 'herd' of 'battery thinkers' Albarn sings of disdainfully in 'Girls and Boys', the single which rescued Blur's career and, as Mulholland observes, 'begat Britpop'. The song both 'sneered at and celebrated our irresponsible '90s hedonism over a decayed rock-disco that oozed sarcasm', he writes, but also became a 'singalong knees-up anthem' for the very people it targeted. I've always imagined David Thewlis's unnamed character in Leigh's 1991 film *Life Is Sweet* to be one of Albarn's hedonistic 'herd', although he comes across more as an opportunistic cynic than a 'battery thinker'; in fact, he rather resembles Albarn himself, with his sarcasm, 'wedge' haircut and football casual's swagger (however the always vain Albarn would never have worn the hideous shell-suit Thewlis's character sports, even ironically). There's even an element of romanticism to the character, in his reluctance to continue merely having with sex his lover, Nicola, and his professed desire for 'intelligent conversation' so he can get to know her as a 'real person' rather than a 'shag-bag', which is also discernible in Albarn, particularly in post-Britpop songs like the decidedly mawkish 'Tender' and the far superior, genuinely wounded, 'Beetlebaum' (from the albums *13* (1999) and *Blur* respectively; significantly both songs deal with his breakup from former girlfriend, Justine Frischmann, leader of Blur's contemporaries Elastica).

Indeed, *Life Is Sweet*, which I also watched repeatedly during the Britpop era, is inextricably linked in my mind to *Parklife*, to the extent that I tend to misremember its title music as being closer to the *Parklife* instrumental track, 'The Debt Collector', than the inane euro-pop song, 'Happy Holidays' that actually does open the film. *Life Is
Sweet's score, by Rachel Porter, does recall 'The Debt Collector', and certain other instrumental passages by Blur, however, at least tonally, while the title music is precisely the kind of vacuous 'sun and fun' anthem the group parodied with 'Girls and Boys'. The film's suburban setting (Enfield, a northern borough of London and part of Middlesex, one of the Home Counties, like Blur's native Essex) also recalls the video for the single 'Parklife' which takes *Life Is Sweet's* palette of primary colours and turns up the contrast to create a cartoonish version of 'ordinary' Britain, peopled with grotesques.  

Writing about the '80s in Britain, Reynolds observed:

>Youth' has been co-opted, in a sanitised, censored version, as a key component of the burgeoning culture of health and self-improvement. Desire is no longer antagonistic to materialism and self-improvement.

Both *Life Is Sweet* and 'Girls and Boys' are '90s texts, however, and present rather different versions of youth: Thewlis's character does not appear to be well-off: his car is an old clunker, his shell-suit lacks a designer logo and his Nikes (which are similar to those worn by Albarn in the 'Charmless Man' video), are far from 'box-fresh'; Nicola, with her bulimia and neuroses, is hardly a picture of health (although she does, as her lover points out, have plenty of 'self-improvement' books: a small library of feminist tomes which she appears not to have actually read); while Albarn's 'battery thinkers' are 'avoiding all work'/Cos there's none available', and participate instead in a consolatory hedonism involving drugs, alcohol and casual sex, often as part of cheap foreign holidays of the kind offered by the travel agent Club 18-30 - carousing clients of which are
featured in the 'Girls and Boys' video - which was typical of British working class youth's experience during the recession of the '80s and early '90s. Life Is Sweet's Aubrey, however, does resemble Reynolds' description of '80s youth, in his entrepreneurship - a form of self-improvement championed in that decade, with its exhortations to 'Just Go For It' and 'Be All You Can Be' - and also in his clothes and speech, both of which, significantly, are influenced by American culture: he wears a baseball cap and a San Francisco Giants' jacket and delivers 'hip' phrases like 'no sweat' and 'megaconfident' in the kind of 'Mid-Atlantic' accent adopted by 'cool' disc jockeys on British mainstream radio at the time. America functioned as a powerful cultural touchstone for Britain during the Thatcher '80s representing, as Reynolds writes, 'the supreme incarnation of the modern, of the coming health-and-efficiency culture: a hyper-technical superabundant society', and continued to do so into (at least) the early '90s, after which Britpop's, and New Labour's, myth of 'Cool Britannia' made the US seem rather vulgar.

[INSERT IMAGE: <Life-is-Sweet-01.tif>

CAPTION: Andy (Jim Broadbent) discusses the purchase of a hot dog wagon with Aubrey (Timothy Spall) as Wendy (Alison Steadman) and Patsy (Stephen Rea) look on in Life is Sweet (1990).]

This is the 'Magic America' that Albarn sings of in the Parklife track of the same name, where 'the air is sugar free/And everyone is very friendly'. When I listen to this song I always see its character, Bill Barrett, as a version of Aubrey particularly after he has holidayed in America and 'bought and ate/Until he could do neither any more', Aubrey, of course, failing to fully meet the healthy and efficient ideal by being overweight.
Aubrey speaks and dresses the way he does because, under Thatcherism, as Reynolds observes, 'we get the following paradox: what's most British is the aspiration to be like the Americans'. As a result, 'what's marginal, dissident, practically unpatriotic, is the Indie scene's defensive Englishness, a patriotism located in the past, a nostalgia for a never-never Britain, compounded from Sixties 'social realist' films and the golden age of British pop'. This is the kind of patriotism espoused by Morrissey who has a tendency to languish in his fantasy of a past, perfect Britain (which is why he can appear to be xenophobic or even racist). Albarn's innovation with Blur, his master-stroke, was to take the Indie scene's nostalgia and insularity as personified by Coxon - and both update and weaponise it, using Britain's cultural history to assault its Americanised present. Leigh's films, I believe, helped him to do so by providing him with a model for a way in which to observe and satirise contemporary - which is to say, Americanised - British culture. (Suede's Brett Anderson may claim that he had the idea first, but he lacked Albarn's populist touch, particularly the latter's facility for slogan-friendly lyrics.)

However, the Albarn of the Britpop era is much more scathing than the Leigh of *Life Is Sweet*: 'Magic America' is a rather one-dimensional jibe at an easily impressed naif rather than a nuanced character study and, as already discussed, 'Girls and Boys', 'Charmless Man' and, particularly, 'Stereotypes' seem driven by contempt (although I accept that the brevity of the pop single format means there is less space for nuance than with a feature film). With *Life Is Sweet*, on the other hand, Leigh is remarkably fair to all of his characters, even Aubrey who, even though he suffers, like Bev in *Abigail's Party*, from bad taste, evidenced in the revolting options on his restaurant's menu, nevertheless demonstrates an impressive degree of culinary knowledge. Nicola does receive a
withering critique of her personality, delivered by her Alburn-alike lover, but then she treats her family in the same way although she is, as he tells her, a 'fake' (just like the similarly superficial Lawrence who owns, but does not read, Shakespeare's complete works). This scathing treatment is, then, ultimately for her own good, as is his refusal to continue to have sex with her, Nicola's insistence on involving chocolate in their lovemaking being an extension of her bulimia, itself rooted in her self-loathing.

**Oasis and Nuts In May**

Damon resembles Nicola's lover visually and in personality, and his acerbic, even aggressive, intelligence also recalls another Leigh character played by Thewlis, Johnny in *Naked*, who is similarly predisposed to expose the personality flaws of others, although he lacks the redeeming desire for genuine engagement evident in both the lover and in Alburn himself. Johnny is a Northern 'gobshite' and we might imagine him, in a David Thomson-esque way, as the lover's Mancunian cousin, who perhaps hoped to seek shelter from his relative after fleeing to London following his rape of a prostitute at the beginning *Naked*.

Manchester is, of course, the home-town of Blur's arch-rivals during the Britpop era, Oasis. I must admit, I can't identify any trace of Leigh's influence in Oasis's music, their image or their videos. The band's two Britpop albums, Definitely *Maybe* (1994) and *(What's The Story) Morning Glory* (1995), share some of Blur's '60s influences most obviously, the Beatles, the Kinks and the Who but lyrically songwriter Noel Gallagher tends to deal in traditional rock 'n' roll themes of hedonism ('Cigarettes and Alcohol', 'Supersonic', 'Champagne Supernova'), escape ('Live Forever'), perseverance ('Roll With
It') and romance ('Wonderwall'), although the records do contain a few vignette-based tracks such as 'Digsy's Dinner' and 'She's Electric' which look at the fine details of 'ordinary' British life. Sartorially, the band initially had a Baggy-meets-soccer fan image - jeans, trainers, waterproof jackets - which avoided any second-hand apparel, perhaps because of an aversion to 'hand-me-downs' born out of working class pride, and referenced the '60s only indirectly, via the the look of the Stone Roses, particularly the hairstyles of Brown and Squire (the band was also a major musical influence, although Oasis eschewed their rhythmical versatility in favour of straight forward rock time-keeping). Oasis's visual referencing of the '60s became more pronounced with the success of Morning Glory when they began to deploy the Union Jack, just as the Who had before them, and associated themselves with former lead singer of '70s Mod revivalists the Jam, Paul Weller, known affectionately in Britain as 'the Modfather'.

I can make one (very) tangential connection to Leigh, however, via his television film Nuts In May (1976). In the film, an uptight, Southern English, middle class couple, Keith and Candice Marie embark on a camping holiday in the peaceful English countryside only to have their bucolic tranquillity disrupted when another couple, Finger and Honky, from Birmingham, in the North, arrive on a motorbike and proceed to violate various articles of the 'Country Code', of which Keith is a strict adherent. The Northern couple are obviously working class - Finger, is a plasterer by trade but currently unemployed due to a housing shortage - and see their own camping trip as an opportunity for hedonism - as a consolation for Finger's situation and the bleakness unemployment has brought to Birmingham - rather than the opportunity for contemplation that Candice Marie and, particularly, Keith seek. Inevitably, Keith and Finger clash. Watching Nuts In
May, as I did, during the Britpop era, it was easy to draw comparisons with the 'class war' going on between bourgeois Southerners, Blur, and Northern proles, Oasis, although Blur were every bit as hedonistic as their rivals, particularly with the rise of the phenomenon of the 'New Lad', which allowed middle class males to participate in homosocial activities - heavy drinking, football hooliganism, the objectification of women - typically, if not necessarily accurately, associated with their working class counterparts.

[INSERT IMAGE: <Nuts-in-May-03.tif>]

CAPTION: Candice (Alison Steadman) and Keith (Roger Sloman) wait out a rain storm while camping in *Nuts in May* (1976).

(Even more tangentially, I was recently reminded of *Nuts In May* while watching Stanley Long's *Bread* (1971) in which a bunch of scruffy working class rock fans first camp on, then attempt to stage a music festival in, the grounds of a run-down country estate. With their leather jackets, flared jeans and feathered hair, they look exactly like the kind of gormless interlopers who started attending, and, with their risible displays of Liam Gallagher-esque 'attitude', ultimately ruined clubs like Divine when *Morning Glory* took Oasis firmly into the mainstream and facilitated the careers of musically conservative 'dad-rock' bands like Cast and Ocean Colour Scene).

**Conclusion**

Blur followed *The Great Escape* with their eponymous album (1997) that drew on American lo-fi and hardcore punk; Oasis followed *Morning Glory* with the musical bombast and lyrical banalities of *Be Here Now* (1997); Pulp followed *A Different Class* with the musically discordant and lyrically bleak *This Is Hardcore* (1998). And Mike
Leigh followed *Naked* with *Secrets and Lies* (1996), an intimate, character driven drama about an adult adoptee attempting to locate her birth parents, which deals with themes of race and class and is as different from *Naked* as that film was from *Life Is Sweet*.

I must confess, I lost interest in all of them after these releases. Apart from singles, I haven't heard any new music by Blur, Oasis or Pulp since, nor have I watched a new film by Leigh.

I greatly enjoyed my experiences in the Britpop years - it was an exciting time to be in one's early twenties - but I wasn't sad to see it die, particularly as its decline had been so ugly, audibly and visually. Almost as ugly, in fact, as the farcical attempt at a revival that occurred in Britain in the 'Naughties' with derivative bands like The View and The Kooks and, particularly, the Kaiser Chiefs whose pallid imitation of Blur extended to titling their d?ut album *Employment* (Blur's was called *Leisure*). There is no room here to go into the look or sound of these bands, so 'derivative' will have to suffice, but it does appear that, sartorially, their influences reached back only as far as the expansion of Mod-associated labels like Ben Sherman and Fred Perry into high street fashion retailing, a move stimulated by the phenomenal success of Britpop.

Several of these 'Britpop 2' bands appear on the soundtrack to the BBC comedy series, *Gavin and Stacey* (2007-10), co-written by and featuring James Corden, who played had a prominent role in Leigh's *All or Nothing* (2002). The series also starred Alison Steadman, who played Bev in *Abigail's Party* (and who was once married to Leigh), in the similar role of Pam, a suburban housewife living in an affluent part of Billericay, a town in Blur's homeland, Essex. As well as containing some of the best performances and scriptwriting in a mainstream British comedy for years, *Gavin and
Stacey also provides a useful insight into the enduring legacy of Britpop, particularly in the clothes worn by the titular Gavin and his best friend Smithy (Corden): Gavin's wardrobe and hairstyle in particular show a distinct Mod influence while Smithy often resembles an overweight version of Albarn circa 'Girls and Boys'. Neither character seems particularly interested in music, however, although both are passionate about football, which experienced a massive increase in popularity during Britpop and the rise of the 'New Lad,' to the extent that music was suborned, through its inclusion in television sports programmes like Sky's *Soccer AM* (1995-, very much the epitome of New Laddism with its bawdy humour and appearances by glamour models in football strips), and the BBC's long-running *Match of the Day* (1964-, which was revamped in the '90s to fit the new cultural climate) to the role of sound-tracking the sport and the attendant lifestyle of its fans, rather than being the focus of their passion.

Gavin and Smithy are also interesting because of their class status: Gavin works in an office while Smithy is, like Finger in *Nuts In May*, a plasterer, although Smithy is self-employed (if not particularly successful); in their early twenties, there is no evidence of either being university educated; both still live with their parents and while we never meet Smithy's family, we know Pam, and her husband, 'company executive' - of his own business - Mick, are well-off, living in a large detached home similar to how I've always imagine Lawrence and Bev's house to look, and to the images of Essex that introduce Blur in *Live Forever*. All of these characters speak with an 'Estuary' accent which has many similarities to the Cockney accent often adopted by Britpop musicians (particularly Albarn) but is not solely associated with the working class. We can safely conclude then, that Gavin, and his family, are (new) middle-class, and comfortably speculate that Mick
and Pam have become wealthy under Thatcherism, Essex having embraced the entrepreneurial Tory ethos of that era (which is probably why Mick owns his own business).

Gavin's Welsh girlfriend, Stacey, is more obviously working class: she too lives in her parental home, which is a much smaller, terraced house, and also works in an office, but in what appears to be a relatively low level, clerical capacity. Her tastes, however, are similar to Gavin's: on their first date they acknowledge a shared enthusiasm for River Island, a high street fashion chain which sells its own, less expensive versions of designer garments, including those by the labels associated with the Britpop revival, and they both display a penchant for 'binge' drinking and for fast food, although Gavin balks at Stacey's insistence on smothering her chips in condiments.

In established sitcom tradition, *Gavin and Stacey* relies upon the tension created by the cultural differences between the two leads. Significantly, these differences are presented as being caused by *nationality* rather than class: Stacey's, and her friend Nessa's, 'Welshness' (peculiar phrases and sayings, the aforementioned aversion to 'dry' chips) frequently baffles Gavin and the other English characters who think of themselves as normal (as, of course, do the Welsh characters). Class is not tackled in any real depth, although we do see that Gavin's family are wealthier than Stacey's - his parents break tradition by paying for the couple's wedding and offer them a substantial down-payment on a house - and that Stacey finds renting accommodation an acceptable compromise when she and Gavin are having difficulty house-hunting, whereas Gavin, in typical Tory fashion, is adamantly opposed to the idea as a waste of money. Additionally, on two occasions Pam, when angry and intoxicated, makes racist comments about the Welsh,
labelling them 'Gypos', a derogatory term for Romanies who are often viewed as an underclass in Britain. The Welsh characters' response to these outbursts is to invoke the cultural stereotype of 'Essex Girls', 'dumb blondes' infamous for their hedonism and revealing outfits. Although the term is regionally specific it is often associated with working class women who have attained a degree of upwards social mobility, as exemplified by Victoria Beckham (aka 'Posh Spice') and also by the character Tracey in the BBC's 'class differences' themed sitcom *Birds of a Feather* (1989-98)\(^{23}\) - whose name, along with that of her less well-off sister, Sharon, became a pejorative slang term for working class females in the '90s - who echoes Bev from *Abigail's Party* and is echoed in *Gavin and Stacey's* Pam (although Tracey's incarcerated husband has acquired his wealth through less legitimate means than Mick: by robbing banks).

Such outbursts are short-lived in *Gavin and Stacey*, with apologies being quickly proffered and accepted and the characters learning to compromise in the name of love, another sitcom convention. However, the absence of any real discussion of class in the series is significant and speaks volumes about British culture since New Labour: the idea of social class being constructed largely around one's economic situation and relationship to the factors of production is considered old fashioned and has been replaced by the concept of a 'meritocratic' society which rewards individual effort, regardless of class background, and allows us all to consume the same good quality commodities, as long as we have the wherewithal to do so. The reality, of course, is less straightforward, as the demonisation by the tabloid press of Romanies as 'thieving Gypos' and of unemployed working class youth as delinquent 'Chavs' (in England) and 'Neds' (in Scotland) demonstrates, as does the continuing problem of homelessness.
Gavin and Stacey has its flaws its characters are almost exclusively white heterosexuals and the treatment of its sole gay character, Stacey's brother Jason, borders at times on the homophobic but it is a far superior response to Leigh's oeuvre than the Britpop revival was to that of Blur, Pulp or Oasis. And it has been extremely popular across a wide audience demographic, moving from the youth-oriented digital channel, BBC3, to mainstream BBC1 via the more 'arts' orientated BBC2. It is my hope, then, that Steadman's presence might encourage viewers, particularly the youth it was initially aimed at, to look back at Abigail's Party and Life Is Sweet and perhaps as a result investigate the rest of Leigh's work, and maybe discover there evidence of the 'secrets and lies' that lie behind the myth, which started with the social mobility of the Swinging '60s, continued with the Thatcher administration's policies of privatisation and deregulation in the '70s and '80s, flourished in the '90s with New Labour's emphasis on consumption, and which still persists at the time of writing (2012) under a Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition government which has introduced severe cuts in public spending including in the areas of health and education, that Britain has become a 'classless' society.

Endnotes

Andrew Smith, 'Pulp TV' in The Face 82, July 1995, NP.

2 Daniels was already something of an icon for his performance as the Mod Jimmy in Quadrophenia (Franc Roddam, 1979) based on the 'rock opera' of the same name by the Who (1973). Along with the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the Small Faces, the Who were once of the 'canonical' 60s groups during the Britpop: Coxon regularly
acknowledged them as one of his favourite groups, Oasis covered their anthemic single 'My Generation', and their use of the Union Jack in their stage wear and record art was a major influence on the Britpop look with supermodel Kate Moss wearing a Union Jack dress and Oasis's Noel Gallagher playing a guitar emblazoned with the flag.


5 Ibid. , 247.

6 Ibid. , 250. my emphasis.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid. , 151.


11 Reynolds, 'Against Health', 251.

12 Ibid. , 254.


14 Ibid.

This may well have been an influence on the hugely successful television series *Little Britain* (2003-6), which was co-created and starred Matt Lucas, who played the molester character in the 'Country House' video, and deals in a similarly grotesque form of humour that has seen Lucas, and creative partner David Walliams, accused of condescension and contempt, particularly in the series' depiction of the working class, accusations which were also raised against Albarn during the Britpop era.

I, personally, am no fan of *Little Britain* and, based on the few episodes I have seen the criticisms of the series do seem justified. However, in the interests of rigorous scholarship, I feel I should point out that Lucas and Walliams also parodied Blur mercilessly in the second season of their earlier series, *Rock Profile* (episode 12, 2002), depicting Albarn as a faux-Cockney who has confused his actual childhood with the musical *Oliver*, and Coxon as a mentally disturbed musical incompetent with a penchant for starting fires.

Reynolds, 'Against Health and Efficiency', 254.

In my fantasy sequel to *Life Is Sweet*, Nicola, who, as the posters on her bedroom wall suggests, is, or at least has been, a keen music press reader, is inspired by Melody Maker's cover story on Huggy Bear, to form her own Riot Grrrl band and finally start to actually *use* the books she has acquired. Ideally, her twin, Natalie, would also be in the band and would come out as a lesbian.

Ibid.

Ibid. 253.

Ibid. , original emphasis.
Included as an extra on the BFI's 2010 DVD release of Lindsay Shonteff's Privilege (1970).

Remade for American television as the short-lived Stand By Your Man (1992) starring Rosie O'Donnell.

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Gillen, Kieron and McKelvie, Jamie, Phonogram Volume 1: Rue Britannia, (La Jolla, CA: Image Comics, 2007).

Mulholland, Garry, This Is Uncool: The 500 Greatest Singles Since Punk and Disco, (London: Cassell Illustrated, 2002).


Smith, Andrew, 'Pulp TV.' The Face 82, July 1995.

Films

by Mike Leigh:
Nuts In May (1976)

Abigail's Party (1977)

Meantime (1983)

Life is Sweet (1991)

Naked (1993)

Secrets and Lies (1996)

All Or Nothing (2002)

Another Year (2010)

by others:

A Clockwork Orange (Stanley Kubrick, 1971)

Bread (Stanley Long, 1971)

Quadrophenia (Franc Roddam, 1979)

Live Forever: The Rise and Fall of Britpop (John Dower, 2008)

Television Series

Birds of A Feather (created by Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran, BBC, 1989-98)

The Word (Channel 4, 1990-95)

Rock Profile (created by David Walliams and Matt Lucas, UK Play/BBC, 1999-2009)

Little Britain (created by David Walliams and Matt Lucas, BBC 2003-6)

Gavin & Stacey (created by James Corden and Ruth Jones, BBC, 2007-10)
Music

Blur

*Parklife*, Food/SBK, 1994

*The Great Escape*, Food/Virgin, 1995

*Blur*, Food, 1997

Goldie

*Timeless*, FFRR Records, 1995

Massive Attack

*Protection*, Circa/Virgin, 1995

Nirvana

*Nevermind*, DCG, 1991

Oasis

*Definitely Maybe*, Creation, 1994

*(What's The Story) Morning Glory?*, Creation, 1995

*Be Here Now*, Creation, 1997

Pulp
*Different Class*, Polygram/Island, 1995

*This Is Hardcore*, Island, 1998

Suede

*Suede*, Nude, 1993

*Dog Man Star*, Nude, 1994

*Coming Up*, Nude, 1996

Tricky

*Maxinquaye*, Island, 1995

*Pre-Millenium Tension*, Polygram/Island, 1996
Written by: Mike Leigh (Screenplay). Script Synopsis: A look at a few chapters in the life of Poppy, a cheery, colorful, North London schoolteacher whose optimism tends to exasperate those around her. Happy Go Lucky Script Resources: Happy Go Lucky Transcript at Springfield! Springfield! Happy Go Lucky Script PDF at Script Fly ($), Happy Go Lucky Script PDF - REVISED DRAFT at Script City ($).

Note: Multiple links are listed since (a) different versions exist and (b) many scripts posted become unavailable over time. Please notify me if you encounter a stale link. Start by marking â€œDevised and Directed by Mike Leighâ€ as Want to Read: Want to Read savingâ€œWant to Read.Â With contributions from international scholars from a variety of fields, the essays in this collection cover individual films and the recurring themes and motifs in several films, such as representations of class and gender, and overt social commentary and political subtexts.